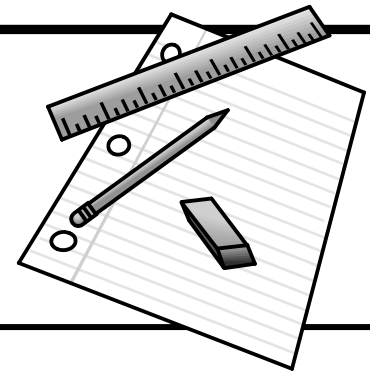


Six Steps to Designing Your Garden



1 Designing with a purpose

The first step in designing a pleasing garden, whether it is a small bed or an entire yard, is to answer the questions why, what, where, who and how. The answers to these questions become the goals and these goals guide the project. By answering the questions, you can design with a purpose.

Why

Why do you want a garden?

- **To hide an eyesore?**
- **To create a beautiful view?**
- **To showcase a particular type of plant?**

What?

What kind of garden?

- **A shrub border?**
- **A butterfly garden?**
- **A cutting garden?**

Where?

Where do you want your garden?

Near a patio?

- **Along the back of your property?**
- **By your front door?**

Who?

Who . . .

- **Will do the soil preparation?**
- **Will install the paths, edging, patio?**
- **Will install the irrigation?**
- **Will do the planting?**
- **Will maintain the garden?**

How?

How . . .

- **Many hours per week do you want to spend working in the garden?**
- **Much do you want to spend?**

2 Assessing the site

Sometimes it is helpful to compare garden designing with painting a picture. The artist paints on a canvas. The gardener designs on the land, the site of the garden. However, the artist's canvas is blank and the gardener's canvas is already occupied.

As Joe Eck explains in *Elements of Garden Design*, "For from the first, the gardener shares the making of the garden with nature. And nature is often the more potent of the garden's two creators The very best gardens are made when nature is a collaborator rather than an adversary." Each garden will be unique and you will need to determine the possibilities and the pitfalls of the intended site. You need to assess the site and

The view

- From what vantage point do you wish to see the garden?
- What are the existing dominant features – a slope, large trees, a backdrop of woods, or a view of the neighbors swing-set?
- Are there existing features that could form a backdrop such as a fence or a grouping of evergreens?
- What is the architectural style of your home? Are there strong lines or a general style that could be repeated in the garden?

Sunlight

- Examine the areas of sun and shade.
- Determine the actual hours these areas receive sun.
- Is it morning or afternoon sun?
- How will these sun/shade patterns change as the seasons change?

Soil

- What is the texture – sticky like clay or can the soil be easily worked?
- Is the soil type compatible with what you want to grow?
- Do you need to amend the soil?
- A soil test will answer all of these questions.

Water availability

- What surrounding plants will compete with the new plantings for water?
- Are you willing to provide additional irrigation either by automatic or manual watering systems?
- Does the soil currently drain well or does it hold water long after a rain?
- Are there run-off areas that carry large quantities of water during rainstorms?

Exposure

- Where is your garden site located – north, south, east or west?
- Will your garden be affected by prevailing southwest winds in the summer?
- Will your garden be affected by prevailing north winds in the winter?
- Is your garden site elevated or located in a low area?

3 Making a site plan

When a landscape design looks good on paper, it will generally translate into an attractive planting. Even if you have the ability to visualize clearly what your landscape will look like, you can still benefit from making a plan on paper. A plan on paper will allow you to more easily comprehend the existing interrelationships of the spaces. This plan can be as rough or as elaborate as you wish, but some calculations are necessary.

Draw an eagle-eye view

Draw the lot outlines and locate the house and existing features. This type of plan is called an eagle-eye or bird's-eye view because it is drawn as if you are looking at the site from the sky.

Include measurements

On the site plan, you will want to include measurements of all important features – the house and garage, sidewalks, driveways, patios and decks, doors, windows, existing trees and shrubs.

Make a rough sketch

Make a rough sketch of the garden site.

Take photographs

Sometimes it is easier to picture the area as it is seen from ground level. However, if you are not able to draw a front view sketch, use a photograph. A photograph can be blown up or photocopied and you can mark directly on the photograph or use a transparent overlay. Photographs are also helpful even if you only use an "eagle-eye" drawing. They will help you to visualize the area as you draw your plan.

4 Making a garden wish list

Before you can begin to draw a successful landscape plan, you must do the following:

Determine your style

Do you prefer a formal or an informal style? Formal gardens feature walks and beds arranged in geometric shapes and aligned with the house. The plantings are symmetrical and there is a strong sense of order and balance. Informal gardens usually contain asymmetric groupings of plants. Paths curve or zigzag through the garden. There is a sense of irregularity, a more natural feel to the garden.

What plants do you want in your garden?

The cardinal rule for choosing plants is to select plants that suit the site. Plants are adaptable, but they have limits. A plant that's adapted to the climate and growing conditions and scaled to the available space appears comfortable and "right" and requires only routine care. When choosing a tree, shrub, ground cover, perennial or any other plant for your landscape, consider these questions:

- Is it adapted to the climate – hardy enough to survive the winter, tolerant of summer heat, not vulnerable to late-spring or early-fall frosts, and strong enough to hold up to wind and storms?
- Is it adapted to the site's soil conditions? Is it sensitive to soil pH? Does it require routine or special fertilization?
- Does it prefer moist or dry sites? Once established, can it survive on normal rainfall?
- How much sun or shade does it need or tolerate?
- Is it susceptible to any pests or diseases that are common in this area?
- How tall will it reach? How wide will it spread?
- How fast does it grow? How long does it live?
- Does it spread out of bounds? Does it produce unwanted seedlings? If you decide you don't want it anymore, is it hard to get rid of?
- Does it need pruning, trimming, grooming, staking, division or other routine care? "How often and how big a job would that be?" asks Rita Buchanan in *Taylor's Master Guide to Landscaping*.

What structural elements — hardscape — do you want in your garden?

A garden is a blend of plants and structures. This blend is what makes the garden functional and aesthetically pleasing. Hardscapes, the structural elements, can greatly enhance your garden.

Walks and paths are used to avoid walking on plant areas or define individual spaces. How walks and paths are designed will determine the type of movement in your garden – curves slow down movement, straight lines are fast and efficient; intersecting paths cause hesitation

Other hardscapes for consideration:

- Patios and decks
- Steps or stairs
- Seating
- Fences and walls
- Arbors and gazebos
- Trellises
- Storage

What amenities — the extras — do you want in your garden?

Do you want any of the following?

- Water features
- Sculptures
- Containers
- Lighting
- Tables

5 Design the planting areas

Locate the garden

Any place you choose to put a garden is the right place if it makes sense in relationship to your purpose. The key to identifying and choosing the best location is to establish a main viewpoint. From where will this garden be seen? There may be more than one place from which the garden will be viewed. Decide which view is the main one. Gardens draw attention. Try to avoid hiding an eyesore with a garden. Using a large group of shrubs, a fence or a wall may be more effective.

Determine the size of the garden

Distant gardens must be large. The further the garden is from the main view, the larger it must be in order to be enjoyed.

An object anywhere between the viewer and the horizon can be a screen. It is not necessary to plant a large garden in front of an eyesore to hide it. A small garden closer to the main viewer can accomplish the same purpose.

Determine the shape of the

garden can be anything that you like and that suits the site.

Provide a background for the garden

Gardens without backgrounds will seem incomplete. The background gives the garden a sense of organization and cohesiveness. A wall or fence can provide the background, but a green, living background may be more practical and harmonious with the surroundings.

Use evergreen plant materials

Evergreens are the backbone of every garden. They provide a sense of stability, strength and unity. Their appearance does not change through the seasons.

Select a focal point within the garden

Focal points are places that draw your eye and cause you to focus for a moment. Where visual lines intersect, strong focal points result; for example, where a fence meets the horizon, where a path disappears, where the walkway meets the front door. Focal points can attract attention to chosen areas and divert attention from others.

In the garden, a focal point can be a special plant or an object. When using plant material as a focal point, it should look good in all seasons. A focal point is important because of what it is and where it is. *Multiple focal points create confusion.* When this happens, the landscape looks jumbled and disorganized. A garden can be full of interesting treasures; it can be complex, but everything must work together as a whole. The problem arises when there are so many features that they compete for attention. "These features are not focal points; they are clutter." (Buchanan 49, 50)

Frame the focal point with plant material

Choose and place groups of plants to highlight the focal point. Select plants from the plant list that are different in some significant way from the focal point. The difference may be in height, foliage color, texture, shape or flower color. Arrange a plant or plants so that the focal point is surrounded, underlined, backed or flanked, but not hidden. The result of this framing will be to maintain interest at the focal point while introducing new plant material.

Carefully design the ends of the garden

The ends of a garden should be anchored with a plant, or group of plants, with good structural quality. Even when they are not in bloom, they should have great foliage. If they are deciduous, they should have characteristics that will provide for winter interest.

Place any other "permanent" plants

"Permanent" plants are those that will stay in place for many years. They are plants that do not require regular or frequent division and may even resent being disturbed.

Tips for the remaining garden space

Use the following tips to fill in the remaining garden space with plants:

- **Arrange plants by height, with tall plants in the back and short plants in the front.**
- **Plants are easier to arrange if odd numbers are used.**
- **If using even numbers of plants, do not arrange the plants in rows or squares.**
- **Use drifts of plants if possible.**
- **Intersperse combinations of two or more plants that bloom at the same time with plant combinations from another bloom time, with foliage plants, or plants that have an extended bloom time.**

6 Other points to consider

Scale

Scale is the relationship of size. It is the visual relationship of each part of a garden to every other part. Aim for a pleasing relationship with the length, width, and height of the elements in your landscape. The size of the lot, the house, and the space surrounding your property will help in determining the appropriate scale for the garden. Small houses and yards call for small plants; large houses and yards call for large plants. The most frequent problem concerning scale . . . gardens are too small.

Balance

Balance involves the relationships among the visual weights of elements in the garden. Symmetrical balance is achieved by selecting identical plant material for both sides of a vertical or horizontal axis. Asymmetrical balance is achieved by planting different plants on both sides of an axis. To achieve balance in an asymmetrical planting, picture the planting as balanced on a serving tray or a teeter-totter. Balance is achieved by adding or subtracting elements or by shifting the positions of elements in the garden. Shape, size, texture and color can all play a role in achieving balance in a garden.

Repetition and rhythm

The most fundamental and commonly used design principle is repetition. An organized repetition of elements brings a sense of unity and continuity. Repeating color, shape, texture or plant combinations establishes a rhythm and a sense of predictability in the garden. Your own tastes will dictate how much repetition you need to strike a balance between busy and boring.

Simplicity

Simplicity, the most difficult design principle to achieve, requires the elimination of anything that detracts from the whole. In garden design, this means reducing the complexity by carefully selecting and arranging plants, paths, amenities and other garden elements.

Harmony

Harmony is a combination of parts into an orderly whole. In garden design, harmony is the careful combination of a variety of colors, textures and patterns to produce a unique place where everything works together.



Hardly a one of the specific descriptions offered here could not be bent, even violated, in the creation of a garden... But once a garden space has been defined... and once the gardener has seized on some central guiding idea or intention, everything else should proceed, resulting in the perfect harmony that is a good garden. – Joe Eck



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